

80077

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CHURCH AIRLIFTSCUBANS TO U. S.

by Jay Mallin

MIAMI -- Thirty-four Cuban former political prisoners and their families reached asylum here in early March aboard a freedom flight sponsored by the Episcopal Church.

The 111 people -- ranging in age from one to 75 -- were the latest of 3,500 Cubans who have reached the United States since the "freedom flights" were first permitted. They are, however, the first to be sponsored by a Church group.

The normal funding channel -- a group known as the 'Committee of 75' -- found itself short of cash when word was received in early February that these prisoners would be allowed to leave. They turned to the Rev. Leopold Frade of Grace Church, New Orleans, and chairman of the Episcopal Church's National Commission on Hispanic Ministries. Father Frade transmitted the need from his diocese -- Louisiana -- to the Presiding Bishop's Fund for World Relief which made an emergency grant of \$6,500 to underwrite the flight.

Among those on the plane was a man who was a leader in an abortive conspiracy against the regime of Fidel Castro in 1959 and was captured when he landed with an armed group from the Dominican Republic. He had spent twenty years and three months in prison. Also on board was a man who had been a high police official in Cuba during the forties.

There were a number of children on the plane. The youngest was one year old. Her father had been in prison for a year and eight months. Among the oldest of the refugees was the 75-year-old father-in-law of a released prisoner who had spent twenty years and one month in prison. The elderly man was ill and had to be hospitalized upon arrival in Miami.





Some of the refugees reported that once they had been cleared for travel to the United States (their names approved by both the U.S. and Cuban governments) their food ration cards had been taken from them and they had to depend on friends for subsistence. Others were ousted from their living quarters and had to make do as best they could.

The flight was chartered from Lanica, the Nicaraguan airline, which provided a 727. First officer on the plane, by coincidence, was Grover Rawlings, Jr., a member of St. John's Episcopal Church in Homestead, Fla.

The aircraft left Miami at shortly after 9 in the morning, arriving at 9:47 a.m. at Jose Marti International Airport at Rancho Boyeros outside Havana. Welcome signs in several languages were displayed from the airport building, and on the field were Cubana de Aviacion and Aeroflot airplanes, as well as an Air Florida plane used for tourist travel.

As the small group from Miami debarked, Father Frade got down and kissed the Cuban soil. He had last been in Cuba in 1960, and is now an American citizen.

The group from Miami consisted of representatives from the dioceses of Southeast Florida and Louisiana, a photographer, two representatives of the Committee of 75, and the Rev. Roberto Perez, a Methodist clergyman.

The Miami group remained at the airport until the refugees could be boarded. The Episcopal Bishop of Cuba, the Rt. Rev. José A. Gonzalez, came to the airport but was not permitted to meet with the refugees.

The refugees, waving handkerchiefs in farewell to watching relatives on the second floor of the airport building, were bused to the plane. At 12:20 the craft took off. Aboard it Father Frade and Mr. Perez displayed American and Cuban flags and led in the singing of the Cuban national anthem. Then copies of the New Testament in Spanish were given to the refugees.

Upon arrival over Miami the refugees sang "Quiereme Mucho" (Love Me Much). At 1:10 the group was on American soil. In less than an hour 111 people had crossed to freedom.

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At Miami airport the refugees were processed by U.S. Immigration and Customs and the Cuban Refugee Center, a federal agency. They were then taken by bus -- with a police escort at the end -- to Tropical Park for further processing.

There they were greeted by the Rev. Max Salvador, rector of Todos Los Santos, Miami, who represented Bishop Calvin O. Schofield, Jr.

As the men, women and children walked from the bus they could see relatives waving from the stands of the main building. Once the processing was completed, the refugees had highly emotional reunions with the waiting relatives. (Those refugees having no families in Miami are cared for by the Refugee Center.)

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#### PICTURE CAPTIONS

# 80077/1 A young woman waves as she rides on a bus carrying her from the airport terminal building in Havana to a Lanica Airlines 727 which had been chartered by the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana to bring 34 recently-released Cuban political prisoners to the United States. The flight was made possible by a grant from the Episcopal Church's Presiding Bishop's Fund for World Relief and the project was coordinated by the Rev. Leopold Frade of New Orleans. (Photo Credit: Jay Mallin II).

# 80077/2 Boarding a 727 aircraft are some of the 111 Cuban refugees -- 34 former political prisoners and their families -- who were brought from Havana to Miami on March 3 on a flight chartered by the Episcopal Church. A \$6,500 grant from the Church's Presiding Bishop's Fund for World Relief to the Diocese of Louisiana made the project possible. The Rev. Leopold Frade of Louisiana was the coordinator of the project. The Diocese of Southeast Florida worked with the Louisiana officials in carrying out the mission. (Photo Credit: Jay Mallin II).

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